

Cooking on a Budget: A Crockery Cookbook for Low Income Populations

**An Honors Thesis Creative Project (HONRS 479)**

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carol A. Friesen, PhD, RD, CD". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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## Abstract

Food is one of the fundamental necessities of life. Unfortunately, some individuals face limited or uncertain access to a nutritionally adequate food supply. Assistance is available to help these individuals gain access to a more abundant food supply, but achieving a nutritionally adequate diet with limited resources still proves problematic for numerous individuals. This Honors thesis creative project, a cookbook entitled, “Slow Cooking on a Budget: A Crockery Cookbook”, is a tool that removes some of the barriers to planning nutritionally adequate meals with limited resources by providing simple, nutritious recipes that utilize low-cost ingredients and limited cookery equipment.

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Additionally, I would like to thank my parents for providing me with a loving, supportive, and food secure environment during my formative years.

Lastly, I would like to thank the countless volunteers who donate their time and generosity to feed the hungry around the world.

## Introduction

Since beginning my education in the field of dietetics, I have always had a strong proclivity toward the area of community nutrition, more specifically, low socioeconomic and food insecure populations. My introduction to one of the many struggles of this group came during my sophomore year while taking a class in meal design. In this class, I was tasked with the assignment of planning a day's worth of healthy meals using a select list of commodity food items. I found it very challenging to design a menu consisting of interesting and nutritious items using the scarce resources provided. For me, this was a one-time assignment; I could not fathom having to do this every day as a means to survival. Unfortunately, for many people living in poverty, this struggle to provide healthy, nutritious meals is a daily reality.

Throughout my college career I continued to engage in opportunities that deepened my passion for community nutrition. During my junior and senior years, I was fortunate enough to be selected as an Honors Undergraduate Fellow, working closely with low-income populations and researching food insecurity. It was through these experiences that I observed firsthand the vast need for nutrition education and intervention in low socioeconomic populations. I knew that I somehow wanted to integrate my enthusiasm for, and experiences with, community nutrition into my senior thesis, but I had not yet decided on the outcome of my project.

Most recently, I began learning about food assistance programs, including the supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. As part of the lesson, I once again found myself faced with the task of planning a nutritionally sound menu using a limited budget. Thinking back to my previous experience,

I knew this was going to be a daunting assignment- one, that at the end of my efforts, proved to be impossible. I spent hours substituting the cheapest ingredients I could think of and still could not meet all of the nutritional guidelines while staying within the funds allotted by SNAP. It was then that I thought to myself, "If I have this much trouble planning a low-cost, nutritious meal with all of my knowledge and skills, how can an average person do this every day?" At that moment, I knew that I wanted to design a cookbook featuring recipes with thrifty ingredients.

The idea to create a cookbook utilizing only a slow cooker and an electric skillet came about as the result of a story I overheard in class. A professor mentioned that she had received a request for a dietitian to testify in court that a parent was unfit to raise a child because there was no stove in the home, and therefore, the parent could not possibly provide adequate nutrition for the child. Although lacking basic kitchen appliances is a condition that is difficult to imagine, it does not make it impossible to provide nourishing meals. In fact, a wide array of hot, nutritious dishes can be prepared using limited funds and appliances. This is what I set out to prove by creating my cookbook, and I feel that I accomplished my goal.

As a result of everything I have learned throughout my undergraduate career, I know now more than ever that it is of great importance for me to share my knowledge and provide education to others in order to help them make healthier choices and improve the quality of their lives. It is through this cookbook project that I am striving to make a positive impact on the lives and nutritional status of individuals in need.

## Background

Food is one of the fundamental necessities of life. Psychologist Abraham Maslow theorized that food, along with water, breathable air, and the regulation of metabolic functions, is a physiological need that is required for survival (Maslow, 1954). An adequate food supply is critical for growth, development, performance, and existence. Food security is defined as having access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life (Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010). It is essential to a healthy, productive population. Conversely, food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways. Frequent or prolonged food insecurity leads to hunger, defined as the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000).

Often, the idea of hunger induces thoughts of a problem that plagues underdeveloped, third world countries. While this is a reality, hunger is a problem that exists in every nation in the world, including our own. The United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world based on gross domestic product per capita (CIA, 2011); however, hunger and food insecurity continue to exist. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's 2010 Economic Research Report, 14.5 percent of households (17.2 million households) in the United States were food insecure in 2010 (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, and Carlson, 2011), meaning that the household had difficulty providing food for all of its family members at some point during the year due to a lack of resources. Food insecurity directly correlates with national poverty statistics, as the nation's official poverty rate was 15.1 percent in 2010 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith,

2011). Although food insecurity in the United States declined slightly from 2009 to 2010, the trend over the past 15 years indicates that food insecurity is steadily rising (USDA, 2011). Hunger and food insecurity is a problem that demands immediate attention and action.

In response to food insecurity, many federally funded and nonprofit food assistance programs have been developed and implemented to increase food security and reduce hunger. One such program is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which currently provides access to food for more than 46 million people each month (USDA FNS, 2012). SNAP is an entitlement program, meaning that anyone who meets eligibility requirements is entitled to receive benefits, which vary based on income, household size, assets, housing costs, work requirements, and other factors. SNAP seeks to improve the diets of low-income households by increasing a family's ability to purchase food (Boyle & Holben, 2010). Although SNAP potentially increases the ability to purchase nutritious foods, there is no guarantee that program participants will do so because there are very few restrictions on what types of food products can be purchased with SNAP benefits.

In order to improve the probability that SNAP participants will make better choices, an optional program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Nutrition Education (SNAP-Ed), was created. SNAP-Ed provides resources to assist participating families in making healthier choices with their SNAP benefits. One such resource is an online recipe finder tool that helps SNAP participants find healthy, low-cost recipes. The tool utilizes filters, which allow the user to select recipes based on ingredient and cooking equipment limitations (USDA, 2012). One piece of cooking equipment that I noticed was lacking from the SNAP-Ed list was a slow cooker. Slow cookers are relatively inexpensive in comparison



to other pieces of cooking equipment and offer a cookery method that rarely necessitates the use of added fat in the way that some more traditional cooking methods do. Therefore, slow cookers can be utilized to produce low-cost, healthy meals. “Slow Cooking on a Budget: A Crockery Cookbook” is a resource that will enable low-income individuals with limited cooking equipment to make more nutritious choices when selecting and preparing meals (Appendix A).

### Product

The outcome of my Honors thesis project is a 4.25” by 5.5”, 52-page, folded booklet consisting of a compilation of recipes utilizing only a slow cooker and an electric skillet as cookery equipment. The book, “Slow Cooking on a Budget: A Crockery Cookbook”, targets individuals of low socioeconomic status and seeks to help these individuals prepare nutritious meals with limited cooking equipment and a limited budget. Samples of the booklet will be provided to local food banks, soup kitchens, and WIC clinics in an effort to reach the target population.

### Content

When I began this project, I had grand ideas of how the final product would look. Initially, I envisioned a full-color, spiral-bound book with large pictures of each recipe. While this would have made for a wonderful cookbook, it was not in keeping with my target population of low socioeconomic individuals. As I began selecting the recipes and formatting them into their final form, I made several decisions that kept the cookbook focused on my target population. A lot of these decisions focused on trimming costs, both on production of the cookbook, and of its included recipes.

My decision making process began with the selection of the recipes. I searched several cookbooks and internet resources before deciding on which recipes to include in my book. My goal was to include 50 recipes of items that could be served for breakfast, lunch, dinner, or dessert. When selecting the recipes, I looked for ones that included ingredients from the SNAP Thrifty Food Plan Market Basket list. The Thrifty Food Plan serves as a standard for a nutritious diet at a minimal cost. I also tried to choose a collection of recipes that utilized similar ingredients, so that consumers of the cookbook could maximize their food resources. Additionally, I looked for recipes with clear, concise directions that would be simple to follow for individuals with low levels of education, a characteristic common to low socioeconomic populations.

Once the recipes were selected, I began the daunting task of compiling them into cookbook form. I decided to make the cookbook as simplistic as possible. I chose a bold, sans serif font to ease readability. I also opted to print the content in only black ink to reduce the cost of producing copies of the cookbook. I included appropriate black and white clip art on some pages to make the book more visually appealing. In order to maximize the blank space created by shorter recipes, I also included small boxes with helpful information related to preparation techniques, slow cooker operation, and smart grocery shopping throughout the cookbook. Lastly, I used the back of the last page in the cookbook, which otherwise would have remained blank, to list contact information for local food programs such as the Farmers' Market, WIC, and Second Harvest Food Bank. In my experience, knowledge of when and where these programs operate is limited.

## Reflection

In my opinion, this creative project is the perfect capstone to my education. Its creation was the culmination of what I have learned through my classroom and fellowship experiences. I plan to share copies of this cookbook with administrators of local programs that serve low-socioeconomic populations. These programs include Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Second Harvest Food Bank, Harvest Soup Kitchen, and Head Start of Delaware County. I hope that the administrators will share my enthusiasm for this project and want to distribute the cookbook to their participants. I believe that this cookbook will increase the food security of these low socioeconomic individuals by making it easier for them to make healthy, nutritious food choices with limited income and cooking equipment.

Leading a healthy lifestyle takes a lot of time, money, and knowledge. Unfortunately, many people do not have nearly enough of these resources to invest. Putting this cookbook into the hands of a person in need will help to alleviate them of the burden of putting nutritious food on their table. This cookbook serves as a tool to impart my nutrition knowledge by means of healthy recipes. The recipes included in the cookbook will save the audience money, through the use of low-cost ingredients, and the time it would have taken them to plan a meal, thereby enabling them to achieve a healthier lifestyle without having to expend more of their few resources. This will allow them to devote more of their time and energy toward providing a better life for themselves and their families.

Looking back on the process of creating this project, I am very proud of what I have been able to accomplish. The outcome has far exceeded my expectations. I feel that this project can positively impact the lives of countless individuals by helping to improve the quality of their diets and the overall quality of their lives.

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